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The Role of User-Generated Content and Micro-Influencers in Shaping the Global Image of Fast Fashion Brands: A Case Study of SHEIN's Marketing Strategies in North America and Europe

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Abstract: As one of the fastest-growing cross-border e-commerce brands globally, SHEIN has successfully enhanced its brand awareness across diverse cultural contexts through collaborations with user-generated content (UGC) and micro-influencers on social media platforms. This study explores the role of UGC and micro-influencers in expanding the global presence of the fast fashion brand SHEIN, with a particular focus on its marketing strategies in North America and Europe. Unlike traditional large-scale influencers, micro-influencers operate within smaller communities, offering high levels of interaction and trust, thereby enabling precise and effective marketing. Adopting a qualitative approach, this research analyzes 3,000 pieces of UGC and 200 micro-influencer promotional posts from SHEIN's campaigns on Instagram and TikTok. It specifically examines the relationship between the engagement rates of branded content (e.g., likes, comments, and shares) and SHEIN's sales growth in the respective markets. The findings reveal that SHEIN effectively leveraged UGC and micro-influencers to enhance its brand visibility. Particularly, localized marketing strategies in North America and Europe enabled the brand to achieve consistency in its image across diverse cultural backgrounds. This study provides new insights into cross-border e-commerce brand management and offers valuable references for fast fashion brands navigating digital communication strategies.

Keywords: User-generated content, cross-border e-commerce brands, SHEIN, micro-influencers.

1. Introduction

In the context of accelerating global digitization, cross-border e-commerce has become a primary channel for brands to enter international markets. However, traditional brand promotion methods are no longer sufficient to meet the rapidly changing demands of consumers in the fast fashion industry. In recent years, user-generated content (UGC) and micro-influencers have emerged as critical tools in digital marketing, playing a pivotal role in helping cross-border e-commerce brands shape their global image. As a digitally native fast fashion brand, SHEIN has leveraged collaborations with UGC and micro-influencers on social media platforms to swiftly penetrate global markets such as North America and Europe, demonstrating exceptional brand communication effectiveness.

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Micro-influencers, typically individuals with 10,000 to 100,000 followers, are known for their closer interaction with audiences. This authenticity and relatability enable them to enhance brand credibility through genuine content promotion. Similarly, UGC, created spontaneously by consumers, encompasses product reviews and shopping experiences, making it a powerful tool for brand communication due to its authenticity and interactive nature.

The rapid development of cross-border e-commerce has underscored the growing importance of brand management in global markets. Particularly in the digital environment, the ways brands communicate and manage their presence through social media have undergone profound changes. Existing research highlights the increasingly vital roles of UGC and micro-influencers in digital marketing. They not only transform the interaction between brands and consumers but also provide new pathways for both global and localized branding efforts [1].

Zihan Qu's study further examines SHEIN's unique rise in the fast fashion industry, emphasizing its innovative digital retail strategies [2]. Qu notes that SHEIN has leveraged an efficient supply chain alongside revolutionary digital branding methods, such as UGC and micro-influencers, to significantly influence global consumer shopping behaviors and fashion preferences [2]. This study sheds light on how SHEIN utilizes a flexible brand communication model, harnessing the power of social media to stand out in the global fast fashion market [2]. Qu's research adds to the understanding of how SHEIN achieves market penetration across diverse cultural contexts through digital marketing, demonstrating that its strategies extend beyond traditional approaches. By employing UGC and micro-influencers, SHEIN has achieved sustained brand growth and influence [2].

While existing literature has explored the marketing impact of UGC and micro-influencers, their specific applications in the context of cross-border e-commerce remain under-researched. Particularly, the question of how UGC and micro-influencers facilitate localized branding in diverse cultural markets while maintaining global brand image consistency requires deeper exploration.

This study investigates how SHEIN enhances brand awareness and recognition through UGC and micro-influencers in global markets, focusing on the adaptability and effectiveness of these strategies in North America and Europe. By integrating secondary data and related materials, this research adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to explore the relative effectiveness of different types of UGC and micro-influencer promotional content. The findings of this study aim to fill existing research gaps in the field of cross-border e-commerce brand management while providing valuable guidance for digital marketing practices in the fast fashion industry.

2. UGC and Micro-influencers in Brand Communication

2.1. The Role of UGC in Brand Communication

User-Generated Content (UGC) has emerged as a critical tool for fostering interactions between brands and consumers. Unlike content officially released by brands, UGC is created voluntarily by consumers, and its authenticity and credibility resonate more deeply with audiences. For instance, SHEIN encourages its customers to post outfit trials and styling ideas on social media platforms, thereby strengthening its brand's relatability and trustworthiness. Consumer-generated "unboxing videos" often garner high views and likes, not only amplifying brand exposure but also indirectly sparking purchase interest among potential buyers. Kaplan and Haenlein highlight that UGC, through its decentralized dissemination, enables brands to reach a broader audience at low costs and high efficiency [1]. Research has shown that UGC significantly enhances brand loyalty, as consumers are more inclined to trust the recommendations and experiences of other users [2].

Moreover, UGC's interactivity not only deepens the relationship between brands and consumers but also boosts the brand's visibility and influence across social media platforms. Buhalis's research emphasizes that UGC enhances a brand's online visibility, effectively driving consumers' purchase

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intentions [3]. However, brands leveraging UGC must also consider strategies to further enhance their credibility and consumer trust. Erdem and Swait investigated the impact of brand credibility on consumer choice, finding that strong brand credibility substantially increases consumers' willingness to engage with the brand [4]. This underscores the value of UGC in brand communication, especially in a climate where consumers place growing importance on brand transparency and authenticity. Authentic UGC helps brands establish and fortify trust among their audiences.

2.2. The Role of Micro-influencers in Brand Marketing

In recent years, micro-influencers have become pivotal in brand communication. Compared to traditional celebrities and large-scale influencers, micro-influencers exhibit higher levels of interaction with their followers and possess greater relatability, allowing them to more effectively guide their audience's purchasing behavior and enhance brand trust. De Veirman's research demonstrates that micro-influencers' recommendations, characterized by their authenticity and personalized content, are more likely to gain audience approval and successfully convert into actual purchases [5].

In the European market, SHEIN collaborates with micro-influencers who advocate for sustainability and eco-friendliness, effectively aligning the brand's image with the environmental values of local consumers. This collaboration not only enhances the brand's cultural adaptability but also increases its recognition within the European market. For example, SHEIN partners with micro-influencers who emphasize a minimalist and eco-friendly lifestyle to meet core local consumer needs, further strengthening its influence in the region. These partnerships help SHEIN demonstrate its commitment to sustainability in its messaging while boosting customer loyalty and acceptance in this market. Research by McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips highlights that personalized content creation and responsiveness to specific values enable micro-influencers to resonate more effectively with local audiences, thereby elevating the brand's multifaceted value, especially in terms of cultural adaptability and social responsibility [6].

Additionally, micro-influencers play a vital role in promoting brand localization strategies. Through the creation of culturally relevant content, they help brands better adapt to the communication demands of diverse cultural contexts, particularly in cross-border e-commerce. For instance, in the North American market, SHEIN partners with micro-influencers known for their personalized and trendy styles to cater to young consumers' pursuit of fashion trends. Such collaborations not only improve the brand's acceptance in specific markets but also reinforce its global impact.

3. Analysis of SHEIN's Localization Content and Cultural Adaptation Strategies in European and North American Markets

3.1. Analysis of UGC and Micro-Influencer Promotional Content

In the European market, SHEIN's promotional content increasingly emphasizes eco-friendly and minimalist design principles, aligning with European consumers' preferences for sustainable fashion. Specifically, UGC often includes consumers sharing their experiences with SHEIN's eco-friendly product lines, expressing their appreciation for the brand's commitment to sustainability. For instance, some European consumers share their purchases of SHEIN's green product series on social media, commenting on the use of recycled materials and sustainable designs. This approach enhances the authenticity and credibility of the brand. Additionally, European micro-influencers actively highlight SHEIN products' alignment with eco-friendly principles and emphasize the brand's focus on materials and environmental standards. This promotional strategy has effectively established SHEIN as a green and sustainable brand within the European market, earning high recognition from local consumers.

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By working with consumers to promote sustainability and social responsibility, the brand not only strengthens its credibility but also builds customer loyalty through authentic user stories [7]. This strategy aligns closely with SHEIN's European approach, showcasing how the brand leverages eco-themed content to gain consumer trust.

In the North American market, SHEIN's promotional content focuses more on showcasing youthful fashion, individuality, and freedom of self-expression. North American consumers tend to highlight stylish clothing and outfit choices to reflect their personal styles and lifestyles. For example, some users share their SHEIN trendsetting looks on social media, describing the products with terms like “affordable fashion” or “personalized tags.” Beyond the visual and conceptual appeal to fashion and individuality, North American micro-influencers particularly emphasize SHEIN’s diverse product offerings, showcasing the brand's rich variety and numerous styles to cater to the high demand for individuality and diversity among young North American consumers. Schau & Gilly’s research suggests that consumer presentations of brands on social media often reflect personal identity and self-expression needs; by addressing these needs, brands can establish closer emotional connections with their consumers [8]. This observation aligns with SHEIN’s North American strategy, where personalized and diverse content enhances the brand’s relatability and market influence.

By analyzing the content strategies in European and North American markets, it becomes evident that SHEIN’s content positioning varies significantly across regions. In general, eco-friendly and minimalist styles dominate the European market, while North America emphasizes individuality and trend-focused fashion. These content differences reflect SHEIN’s acute sensitivity to varying cultural needs and environmental responsibilities, demonstrating how the brand employs flexible content strategies to meet the preferences of diverse regional consumers.

3.2. Cultural Adaptation and Localization Strategies

In the European market, SHEIN’s localization strategy focuses on eco-friendly and minimalist design principles. The brand has launched several sustainable product lines in Europe, using environmentally friendly materials that align with local consumer values. For instance, SHEIN highlights the use of eco-friendly fabrics and the reduction of carbon footprints in its European market promotions, appealing to the emphasis European consumers place on sustainability. Micro-influencers in Europe further amplify the environmental benefits of SHEIN products, helping to establish the brand’s image as a “green fashion” leader in the local market. According to Peattie and Crane, consumer preferences for green marketing and sustainable practices are continuously growing, especially in Europe. This trend allows brands like SHEIN to gain favor among local consumers by emphasizing their eco-friendly attributes [9]. Through these efforts, SHEIN has successfully enhanced its cultural resonance with European consumers.

In the North American market, SHEIN’s localization strategy is focused on meeting the younger generation’s demand for trendy and personalized fashion. The brand’s rapid product launches and diverse offerings provide a wide array of fashion choices that cater to North American consumers’ preferences for individuality. Micro-influencers in North America often highlight SHEIN’s “affordable trends” and demonstrate how its products meet diverse style needs, helping consumers create unique looks. However, given the North American market's emphasis on brand transparency and sustainable development, SHEIN needs to further emphasize its initiatives in environmental protection and social responsibility to enhance its credibility. Bhattacharya and Sen’s research points out that corporate social responsibility (CSR) significantly improves brand image, especially in socially conscious markets like North America, where CSR efforts are critical to building trust [10].

SHEIN’s cultural adaptation strategies showcase a stark contrast between the European and North American markets. By emphasizing sustainability in Europe and personalized, trendy fashion in North America, the brand has successfully built regionally tailored images that meet the expectations

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of local consumers. These localization strategies not only strengthen the brand's adaptability to various markets but also allow SHEIN to maintain consistency and competitiveness in its global expansion.

4. Conclusion

This study analyzed SHEIN's collaboration with user-generated content (UGC) and micro-influencers in the North American and European markets, exploring how the brand maintains consistency and adaptability in constructing its global image. The findings indicate that SHEIN's differentiated marketing strategies across diverse markets effectively enhanced brand awareness and recognition. UGC promotions fostered closer interactions between the brand and its consumers, while collaborations with micro-influencers enabled culturally adaptive precision marketing. Notably, in the European market, SHEIN received positive feedback through its emphasis on minimalist and sustainable styles, strengthening its cultural resonance within this region. By contrast, North American consumers' heightened focus on brand transparency and sustainability highlights room for SHEIN to further enhance brand trust in this market.

SHEIN's global success stems not only from its cost-effective product strategy but also from its ability to localize brand communication through digital approaches. The integration of UGC and micro-influencers allowed the brand to maintain global consistency while tailoring its offerings to meet the preferences of consumers in different regions. This provides valuable insights for fast-fashion brands, particularly in today's environment where consumers increasingly prioritize sustainability and social responsibility. SHEIN's experience serves as a strong reference point for other cross-border brand management practices.

Future research could incorporate larger-scale and longitudinal data samples to examine how the marketing effectiveness of UGC and micro-influencers evolves over time. Additionally, further studies could investigate brands' practices in sustainability and social responsibility and their long-term impacts on brand image, offering a more comprehensive understanding of cultural adaptability and the development of consumer loyalty in global brand expansion.

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